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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISLAMABAD 000070

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SUBJECT: FRENCH AMBASSADOR BRIEFS FM KOUCHNER VISIT

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Classified By: Anne W. Patterson, Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The Ambassador met January 4 with French counterpart Regis de Belenet to discuss the recent visit to Pakistan of French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner. Kouchner intended to meet with Asif Ali Zardari, husband of the late Benazir Bhutto, but the GOP recommended against the trip to interior Sindh because of security concerns. Instead, Kouchner spoke to Zardari by phone. The latter said his party would accept an election delay and pushed for a UN investigation into his wife's assassination. Belenet revealed that Kouchner may actually propose to the EU an "International Independent Group of Eminent Persons" to partially address Zardari's (and international) demands for an independent investigation. Belenet also reported that French intelligence pointed to al Qaeda leader Baitullah Mehsud as being responsible for Bhutto's death, that the European Commission would soon deploy long-term election observers throughout Pakistan, and that Kouchner pushed Musharraf to release lawyers Aitzaz Ahsan but did not raise the issue of restoring the judiciary. End summary.

Kouchner On Message

¶2. (C) On January 4, French Ambassador Regis de Belenet briefed the Ambassador on French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner's hastily arranged December 31 - January 2 visit to Pakistan. Belenet said that the visit was confirmed late December 30 after French President Sarkozy called Pakistani President Musharraf earlier that same day. Though Slovenia currently holds the EU Presidency, France serves as "acting" in countries like Pakistan where Slovenia does not have a bilateral mission, so Belenet also represented the EU in these meetings.

¶3. (C) Belenet told Ambassador that Kouchner came with four key objectives: (1) to show French/European solidarity with Pakistan "against the cruelty of terrorism;" (2) to ask for "an unquestionable clarification" of the circumstances surrounding the assassination of Pakistan People's Party (PPP) leader Benazir Bhutto; (3) to encourage respect for democracy and progress on sustainable development; and (4) to push for general elections as soon as possible.

Stuck in Islamabad

¶4. (C) Kouchner had originally planned to travel to Naudero (Larkana, Sindh) to pay his respects to the Bhutto family, but the GOP advised against it for security reasons. The GOP had to admit, Belenet added, that it "could not guarantee Kouchner's safety," fearing that the informal, tribal security of the region to which the Bhutto clan belongs would clash with government security agencies. The GOP also wanted to discourage other foreign dignitaries from attempting travel to this part of Sindh, Belenet surmised.

¶5. (C) The French Consul General in Karachi instead was sent to see Bhutto's widower, Asif Ali Zardari, while Kouchner offered condolences to Zardari via phone and laid a memorial wreath at the Rawalpindi site of Bhutto's assassination. Belenet said that Kouchner found Zardari to be "flexible," specifically on the possibility of a delayed election. Though Zardari reportedly insisted to Kouchner that the party wanted elections on January 8, Zardari also committed to speak out against protests if a delay were announced.

Ideas for an Investigation

¶6. (C) Zardari took this opportunity with Kouchner to push for a UN investigation into Bhutto's assassination. Belenet added that Pakistani human rights leader Asma Jahangir reiterated this point to Kouchner, asking for an "independent investigation." Belenet said that Asma feared an investigation by the U.K.'s Scotland Yard, which had been rumored in the press that day, would be nothing more than a "stamp of approval" of an already botched GOP investigation.

¶7. (C) In response to such Pakistani and international

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pressure, Kouchner was toying with the idea of an "International Independent Group of Eminent Persons" (IIGEP), which would be proposed to the EU, Belenet said. Kouchner had been part of such a group, assigned to looking into recent killings in Sri Lanka, before becoming foreign minister.

¶8. (C) Belenet then mentioned to the Ambassador that French intelligence seemed to indicate that Bhutto's assassination was the work of Pakistani al Qaeda leader Baitullah Mehsud. He dismissed the conspiracy theories of government involvement. According to Belenet, Musharraf told Kouchner in their meeting that the GOP had difficulty bringing Mehsud to justice because (1) he was hiding with his tribe and (2) the GOP was worried about collateral damage if it actually did invade the area. Musharraf said the government was trying to work with mullahs and religious party leaders.

Other Meetings

¶9. (C) Stuck in Islamabad, Kouchner instead met with PPP Senators Abbasi, Baig and Khosa. He also met with leaders of the ruling Pakistan Muslim League (PML) and Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM), and of the religious party Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI-F). Belenet regretted that a leader from opposition Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) was not available in Islamabad.

¶10. (C) Belenet also reported that his Foreign Minister met with Musharraf and Caretaker Prime Minister Soomro, separately. According to Belenet, both advocated an election delay (announced later that day) because of damage to Election Commission offices and related election materials. The start of the holy month of Moharram would force a delay of at least a month, Musharraf reportedly added. Pakistan's Army, which was to be deployed during this period, would stay deployed through the new election date. Musharraf insisted to Kouchner that these elections be "peaceful" in addition to free, fair and transparent.

¶11. (C) Belenet mentioned to the Ambassador that, with the election delay, the European Commission would likely deploy about 50 long-term observers mid-next week.

¶12. (C) Responding to the Ambassador's specific questions, Kouchner reportedly pushed Musharraf to release Supreme Court Bar Association president Aitzaz Ahsan, but was quiet on the issue of restoring the judiciary.

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